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Submitted in Partial Completion of the Requirements for Commonwealth Interdisciplinary Honors in Art History and English

Bridgewater State University

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Abstract

This creative thesis addresses paintings and other visual representations of different Buddhist Hells and responds to them through written poetry. Visions of Hell is a compilation of eight poems inspired by several of the many Buddhist Naraka, or Hells. These are not the traditional “Hells” one might imagine today, if anything, they were closer to our notion of Purgatories. Each hell is reserved for specific types of sinners—the type or crime dictating the appropriate hell to inhabit. However, this causal relation, typically present in works of Buddhist art, is not used in the poems. This compilation narrates the story of a man who has just poisoned his wife after she cheated on him. Confronted by images of Buddhist Hells, he inserts himself in the paintings while attempting to deal with his guilt.
Aqua

no one would look for a murderer
in a museum
I sit under a portrait of Guiliana Tofana
and listen to a tour guide describe
how this woman helped kill over 600 husbands in Italy
between 1633 and 1651
when her makeup business turned into
poison and she sold to women
who wanted their husbands dead.
just a few drops in a betrayers’ soup
was all it took
for them to die and
her to get caught
I get up
take eight turns
left right left right
left right right
then a final left

I encounter
monsters
Journey to the East

I am a perverted cartographer
drawing lines and conclusions
from lands where there might be monsters
and from there I go off the edge of the map
where a great dane dragon salivates
at the thought of my buttocks
a mix of white scales and marled fur
accentuate the void-black eyes
with which it stares at me
I look into the dark
And it knows what I have done
I loved her
and she me
but also others
or maybe she didn’t love but
she got tired
and could not understand the
rightness and the perfect order
of where things belong
she took my book
Love in the Time of Cholera
and put returned it
in between Balzac’s Serafina
and his Droll Stories
because she thought
the colors of the spines
were the same
and that was important
then she read
A Room of One’s Own
are all maps
really self portraits
Ankyloglossia

hold your tongue
she would tell me
but I never could
or wanted to
but now I can see myself
here
being held up by my tongue
hanged
my frenulum snaps
like a guitar string
strung too tight
I choke
and pull my body up
but it drops and
my tongue rips
red wet iron
drips down my throat
dripping in my stomach
creating a river
the only moisture
in my arid mouth
and the taste of iron
devolves to something
warm and viscous
it rises and fills my throat
until I can no longer breathe
I choke and my body contracts
harder
again and again
I fall
Persimmon

I make her soup
Ethyl N-2 Diisopropylaminoethyl methylphosphonothioate
with tomato--served along grilled cheese
I left when she wasn't feeling well
words would have been blurry
or just her eyes
and she'd reach for her chest
as the snakes below her skin began to
writhe
and she would join them
dancing until they look at her and
she turns to stone
and her mind would stop racing
when her heart shrivels
like dried fruit
but I imagine what being boiled feels like
would I start slow?
as they do with lobsters
like they did on our first anniversary
when the lust colored crustacean
looked at us
did it not realize it was dying?
or would I get in the pot
when it is roaring?

I'd see the rush of pink
start at my toes
and travel up my legs
red trailing shortly behind
past my groin
navel
and to my chest where
the water stops
but is joined with my own water
popping out of me
and my raw skin cooks
I wonder what seasoning they would use
I inhale the smoke from the logs
which are heating the cast-iron pot
and am joined by the charred bits
the remnants of those cooked before me.
I sink to the bottom and
stick to the pot
charring myself
and boiling water fills my lungs
hundreds of cigarettes
are being put out on my insides.
burnt and overcooked
I see her persimmon withered
black iron prongs reach for my throat
and wrench me out of my stew.
I'm not done yet.
but through boiled shut eyes
I see her
waiting outside of the cauldron
I wonder what she saw

I made her soup
Dermis

fire from underneath my skin
I feel a cold burn
the monsters go strip by strip
peeling and pulling
It must be satisfying
I feel closer to the table
one million bee stings
motionless bubbles silently well
my skin cries
and sates the fourteen headed dog’s thirst
while weasels burst
out from beneath my legs
splitting bone and
snapping muscle
I realize
my ears are gone
the chiming of one-hundred bells
ring below my temples because
I stopped being able to hear
over the sound of my own screams
I cannot close my eyes
and I can never stop
inhaling the smoke
from flames different from my own
I feel an incredible rush
as they pull
my stomach up
through my mouth and
it scrapes on my teeth
tearing
spilling bile and blood
on me
and corroding what they reveal
I see my face
worn
and the monster
approaches her
Canto 1097

I have seen
the sun
I see
it every second
of what
was a day
stretched
out
too fragile
for Time to
mark
with it's hands
and too
satisfied
best left
alone
if it breaks
I'll see
the moon
and seconds
will measure days
not eternities and
she is here
chained to me
she does not
know
that I
killed
Her
Stars

I sit up straight
I hold my head in my lap
red, pulsating
my hands probe the stump
at the base, dripping

With bits and chunks
slipping out and unloading.
a thick, plump, wet leaf
cradles the stalk
I taste my own hands.
iron
earth
sulfur

My vision fades to varicose versions of
the flood messenger
Andromeda's would-be killer
The vain queen and her husband
a cloak of streaming
gurgling crimson
draped on my body
I hear the drumming and
thrumming
of the demon's foot
a warden
toward me
dust, or fallen flakes
of skin rise at his feet
in a cloud
dry
I've been in this place before

Killing might become just like drinking
a glass of water
Perennial

Parched
starving
and the room around me
spins
I see the guard
but I am invisible
to him
my mouth is dried shut
and behind the guard
there stands a demon
with a complexion of
butterfly pea tea
it reminds me of water
and I must drink
I scuttle and shuffle
through the galleries
all of my muscles seize
and my joints tear
sockets grinding with each step
freshly arthritic now
I am see through
only I can see
my stomach hanging
lower
desolate and desiccated
but the size of a pumpkin
and the color of raw oysters
the rest of my body is shriveled
like the raisins in the cafeteria
another demon watches me
as I bring a bottle to my lips
the first drip of water
touches my tongue
turns to flame
and I cannot put it down
an entire bottle
the current of fire
scorches my throat
and pools in my gut
the demon approaches
and leaves weeping plums
on me with his snakewood club
bread turns to ash in my hands
the fire never stops burning
This poem compilation began as a desire to write something beautiful about things that are very much not so, hells—while these poems do respond to hellish images, they also convey a narrative. I had originally planned on researching specific hells and what sins one had to commit in order to be sent there, then drafting poems which were not only ekphrastic, but also informed by the religion. My initial idea was to have different speakers for each of the poems, however this created an inconsistent narrative, and while still technically a cycle legitimized by the topics, it felt too inconsistent.

In the Buddhist religion, over the course of a persons’ life, they will accrue Karma. Karma can be good or bad based on the persons’ actions, the concept of Karma is the accrual of spiritual responsibility taken for one’s actions over the course of their life. After a person dies, they are reborn and, based on their karma, they go to different places. Some go to a heaven, where nice and pleasurable feelings last longer, others go to a hell, where sinners go to learn from their mistakes in previous lives, and other realms, the realm of the Hungry Ghosts, Pretas, a realm of titans, one of the gods, Devas, and the human realm. Each of these realms is viewed as a stop on the way to achieving Nirvana, or enlightenment. As such, none of these realms are permanent unlike in other religions—hell is a place one goes to “work off” their Karmic debt. When the sinner becomes more enlightened, they may leave their hell and move on to a different realm.

There are different schools of Buddhist thought, and as such, different hells even for the same sinners. To avoid mixing different schools, or adhering to only one, I chose to create a speaker who is similarly engaging in an ekphrastic endeavor. The speaker of the poems is guilty of murdering his wife and encounters images of Buddhist hell. His guilt drives him to put himself in the places of those who are suffering in the artworks. In each hell, he rethinks and reconciles his actions. In the final poem, he is “reborn” into the realm of the Hungry Ghost, still suffering and learning but closer to enlightenment.
Each of the poems responds to a different hell, one that creatively tortures the speaker and confronts him with his murdered wife. The contemplation of hell, in any capacity, is a challenging task to undertake, it is consider gruesome methods of torture and describe it in detail. To write these poems, I began by writing multiple poems a day. Mostly inspired by the concept of hell estranged from Buddhism, then taking lines from some and expanding upon them until this body of work emerged. The poems in this compilation were workshopped and revised according to the feedback received. When presented to the readers though, they did not have the images associated with each poem which forced each poem to be evaluated on clarity and craftsmanship on their own.

When completed, the poems were meant to be published on the images to keep in line with the tradition of poets during the periods in which the artworks would have been created. However, artworks such as those were created with intentional negative space on which a poem was to be written—the poems were not an afterthought, but part of the artwork itself. The poems included in this compilation exist alongside its respective representation of hell, rather than in its respective hell.
Works Consulted:
